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Burma: The return of the ‘vigilantes’

(08:01 AEDT, 22 April 2015)

The use of civilian ‘vigilante’ groups to help the national police quell two cases of civil unrest in Myanmar raised a number of questions about these shadowy organisations, the motives behind their employment by the authorities and even the reform process itself.

In 2011, Burma’s hybrid civilian–military government launched an ambitious reform program that, among other things, envisaged the transfer of primary responsibility for Burma’s internal security from the armed forces to the national police force. Given Naypyidaw’s firm and public commitment to this policy, it was surprising last month to see ‘vigilante’ groups being used by the authorities to help quell civil unrest.

In Burma, the use of such groups to ‘assist’ in the resolution of political disputes has a long history. In the 1950s, for example, political bosses employed gangs of enforcers. During the Ne Win era (1962–88), the Burma Socialist Programme Party was used to help monitor the mood of the civilian population, generate support for the government and in various ways encourage compliance with the regime’s laws and regulations.

After the armed forces took back direct political control of the country in 1988, ‘unofficial’ civilian groups played a more direct role, including in the security arena.

In 1993, Burma's ruling military council created the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). Its main purpose was to mobilise the population in support of the regime's policies. Not long after its formation, there were reports of the creation of a USDA-sponsored 'militia', designed to provide paramilitary, intelligence and law enforcement services to the regime.¹ The militia's structure was believed to broadly mirror that of the civil administration, but it had no legal status.²

One part of this militia was later identified as the Swan Ah Shin (SAS; literally, 'Masters of Force'). This was essentially a loose collection of civilians attached to local councils that included members of the fire brigades, first aid organisations, women's organisations and the USDA, as well as criminals released from jail, members of local gangs, the unemployed and the very poor.³ At different times, reports have put SAS groups under the command of the civil authorities, intelligence agencies, the army and police.

These organisations first prompted international scrutiny in 1996, when Aung San Suu Kyi's car was attacked in Rangoon by about 200 USDA supporters. In 2003, her motorcade was set upon by a much larger mob at Depayin in Upper Burma. These 'government-affiliated forces' (as they were described by the US State Department)⁴ appear to have been organised in an effort to intimidate (or, in the latter incident, possibly even assassinate) the popular opposition leader.⁵ At Depayin, dozens of her followers were killed and many more were injured.

The SAS also played a part in the suppression of the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007. Up to 600 criminals were said to have been released from jail and given basic training in crowd control. They were initially used

1 *The White Shirts: How the USDA Will Become the New Face of Burma's Dictatorship* (Mae Sot, Thailand: Network for Democracy and Development, 2006), burmacampaign.org.uk/media/USDA-2.pdf.

2 *Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma*, Report, Vol.19, No.18(C) (New York: Human Rights Watch, December 2007), www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma1207web.pdf.

3 United Nations General Assembly, *Human Rights Situations That Require the Council's Attention: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar*, A/HRC/6/14 (New York: UN Human Rights Council, 7 December 2007), burmalibrary.org/docs4/HRC2007-12-SRM-A-HRC-6-14-en.pdf.

4 Richard Boucher, Spokesman, 'Burma: Second Anniversary of Attack on Aung San Suu Kyi', Press statement, US Department of State, Washington, DC, 26 May 2005, 2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/46836.htm.

5 'Premeditated Depayin Massacre', www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/Yearbook2002-3/yearbooks/Depayin%20report.htm [page discontinued].

to intimidate protesters⁶ but, after the anti-government demonstrations grew in size and scope, SAS members acted in concert with the police and army. The state-run *New Light of Myanmar* described them as 'peace-loving people' preventing 'instigators from trying to cause instability and unrest'.⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi has called them Burma's Brown Shirts.

Since 2007, there have been claims that shadowy groups like the SAS have been involved in other outbreaks of civil unrest. For example, several commentators and activist groups have suggested that the Buddhist extremists active in 2012 and 2013 had official sanction—accounting for the apparent reluctance of the police and army to prevent the anti-Muslim violence that occurred in those years.⁸ No firm evidence of such sponsorship, however, has yet been produced.

Indeed, it was hoped that, with the advent of a new and reformist government in 2011, the use of groups like the SAS would cease. Naypyidaw emphasised the management of internal security through an expanded and modernised civil police force, which publicly embraced modern doctrines such as community policing.⁹ The role of the armed forces was reduced and greater emphasis was given to 'the rule of law'.

Such hopes, however, have been dashed.

Last month, 100 or so civilian 'auxiliaries' were used to break up the remnants of a garment workers' strike at the Shwepyithar Industrial Zone.¹⁰ Auxiliaries were also deployed outside Rangoon City Hall during a protest against the National Education Law. Wearing red armbands stating that they were 'on duty', they assaulted the protesters and helped police to detain eight of them.

6 Michael Van Es, 'Burmese People-Power Powder Keg', *Himal Southasian*, [Kathmandu], 10 December 2008, old.himalmag.com/component/content/article/1315-burmese-people-power-powder-keg.html [page discontinued] [now at www.himalmag.com/burmese-people-power-powder-keg/].

7 'Burmese Vigilante Group Arrests Citizens', *Fifty Viss*, 20 May 2007, viss.wordpress.com/2007/05/20/burmese-vigilante-group-arrests-citizens/.

8 Francis Wade, 'Burma Recruits Vigilante "Duty" Mobs to Quell Student Protests', *Asian Correspondent*, 6 March 2015, asiancorrespondent.com/author/insideburma/ [page discontinued].

9 Andrew Selth, *Police Reform in Burma (Myanmar): Aims, Obstacles and Outcomes*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.44 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2013), www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/512379/Regional-Outlook-Paper-44-v.2-Selth.pdf [page discontinued].

10 Fiona MacGregor, 'Garment Workers Deserve Support Too', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 16 March 2015, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/opinion/13530-garment-workers-deserve-support-too.html#.VQjyCfGjWQ.facebook.

These 'vigilantes' were recruited by ward officials at the order of the Chief Minister of Rangoon Region. Most seem to have been unemployed men who were offered meals and modest daily payments to 'assist' the authorities maintain law and order. Some were only teenagers.¹¹ They were untrained, ill-disciplined and, as far as can be determined, poorly led. During the Rangoon protest, they appear to have ignored or exceeded police orders.

Strictly speaking, the popular label 'vigilante' is a misnomer. These auxiliaries were not self-appointed. Nor were they acting without legal authority. As both regional and national officials have pointed out, according to Article 128 of the Burmese Code of Criminal Procedure (which dates from 1898), magistrates and police station chiefs have the right to recruit civilians to assist in the breaking up of protests and to help make arrests.¹²

On 10 March, President Thein Sein ordered an investigation into whether or not the security forces acted properly in Rangoon, and whether the authorities acted in accordance with the law. The commission's report was due on 30 March but has not been released.¹³ It is unlikely to find the authorities at fault, but it may help answer some of the questions surrounding the use of deputised civilians.

Whether or not the recruitment of such groups is found to be legal, the thinking behind their use is hard to fathom. The Shwepyithar and Rangoon protests were quite small and could easily have been handled by police security battalions. Even if the auxiliaries did not behave badly, they had no legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Their use thus undercut the authority of the national police. Indeed, to many police officers, they threaten a key goal of the force's reform program, which is to win back the respect of the population through higher standards, adherence to the rule of law and better community relations.

11 Nobel Zaw, 'Students, Activists Allege Violence in Rangoon Protest Crackdown', *The Irrawaddy*, 6 March 2015, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/students-activists-allege-violence-in-rangoon-protest-crackdown.html.

12 'Plainclothes Vigilantes Make a Comeback in Rangoon', *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2015, www.irrawaddy.org/burma/plainclothes-vigilantes-make-a-comeback-in-rangoon.html.

13 Ye Mon, 'Govt Keeps Report on Vigilantes Under Wraps', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 6 April 2015, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13925-govt-keeps-report-on-vigilantes-under-wraps.html.

There has been an outcry in Burma and abroad against what many see as a return to the 'bad old days' of 'officially sponsored thugs' being used to crush popular dissent.¹⁴ The use of such tactics has added to growing scepticism about the November elections and the government's willingness to permit criticism of its policies in the leadup to the poll. Some commentators have even cited the recent use of 'vigilantes' to raise doubts over the entire reform process.¹⁵

This is drawing rather a long bow, but after last month's events Naypyidaw certainly has some serious questions to answer.

14 'Behind the Mask', *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 7 April 2015, www.mizzima.com/news-features/behind-mask.

15 'Sliding Backwards to 1962?', *Mizzima Weekly*, [Yangon], 26 March 2015, www.mizzima.com/news-opinion/sliding-backwards-1962.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.